

Abstract ID : 494

Title : Evaluating the post-release success of rehabilitated manatees in Florida, 1973-2002

Category : Behavior

Student : Not Applicable

Preferred Format : Either Oral or Poster Presentation

Abstract : Between 1973 and 2002, 608 manatees were handled through the Manatee Rescue, Rehabilitation and Release Program in Florida. In 134 cases, animals were assisted on site and returned almost immediately to the wild. To address the issues of adaptive success, a post-release monitoring project was initiated in 1988. To date, 76 captive manatees (38 males, 38 females) have been released with radio transmitters, and more than 23,000 tracking days (equivalent to 63.0 tracking years) have been amassed over the 15-year period. Tracking bouts ranged from 2 to 1190 days per individual. Of the original 76 released and monitored animals, 18 have been reported dead. The remaining 58 manatees are believed to be active within the wild population. The program overall has benefited the wild population from the expected contribution of the additional 256 manatees released to date without tags. General trends in behavior collected from monitoring indicate that adult manatees held for short periods of time return to typical wild animal behavior shortly after release, whereas animals with little or no free-ranging experience and those held for long periods face greater adaptive challenges after release. These naïve cases can experience problems related to disorientation and lack of knowledge required to locate and utilize manatee habitats, especially in regard to finding appropriate forage, fresh water, and warm water sources during winter. Lack of adaptive behaviors in naïve animals may be related to age class at time of rescue, length of time in captivity, and facility variations in rehabilitative rearing, husbandry techniques, and procedures in pre-release conditioning. Our conclusions are that the longer manatees are held in captivity, the lower their chances of survival after release. Likewise, the experience obtained in the wild before captivity is paramount to the animal's ability to meet the challenges they will face in today's environment.